METHODS OF DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE OF FUTURE TEACHERS IN THE CONDITION OF TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract : In this article we aim to speak about intercultural competence of students` in learning a foreign language, some issues relating the theme and ways of achieving success during the class. Knowledge, awareness and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the 'world of origin' and the 'world of the target community' produce an intercultural awareness. It is, of course, important to note that intercultural awareness includes an awareness of regional and social diversity in both worlds. In addition to objective knowledge, intercultural awareness covers an awareness of how each community appears from the perspective of the other, often in the form of national stereotypes.

Plurilingual and pluricultural competence is generally uneven in one or more ways. Such imbalances are entirely normal. Whereas the traditional view of 'monolingual' communicative competence in the 'mother tongue' suggests it is quickly stabilised, a plurilingual and pluricultural competence presents a transitory profile and a changing configuration. Depending on the career path, family history, travel experience, reading and hobbies of the individual in question, significant changes take place in his/her linguistic and cultural biography, altering the forms of imbalance in his/her plurilingualism, and rendering more complex his/her experience of the plurality of cultures.

Keywords: *plurilingualism, pluriculturalism, stabilize, imbalance, critical importance, personalidentity, competence, social identity.*

INTRODUCTION

There are many ways in which modern languages are currently learnt and taught. Cultural identities (the identities which people construct on the basis of their membership of cultural groups) are a particular type of social identity. Culture itself is a notoriously difficult term to define.

Cultures also change over time because of their members' internal contestation of the meanings, norms, values and practices of the group. The ways in which individuals relate to the cultures to which they are affiliated are complex. Because cultural participation and cultural practices are context-dependent and variable, individuals use the multiple cultural resources which are available to them in a fluid manner to actively construct and negotiate their own meanings and interpretations of the world across the various contexts which they encounter in their everyday lives. However, cultures also constrain and limit the thoughts and actions of individuals. Cultural affiliations influence not only how people perceive themselves and their own identities, but also how they perceive others, other groups and other ways of acting, thinking and feeling, and how they perceive the relationships between groups. Intercultural competence is therefore a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills applied through action which enables one, either singly or together with others, to:

— understand and respect people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself;

— respond appropriately, effectively and respectfully when interacting and communicating with such people;

— establish positive and constructive relationships with such people;

— understand oneself and one's own multiple cultural affiliations through encounters with cultural "difference".

Here, the term "respect" means that one has regard for, appreciates and values the other; the term "appropriate" means that all participants in the

situation are equally satisfied that the interaction occurs within expected cultural norms; and "effective" means that all involved are able to achieve their objectives in the

interaction, at least in part.

MATERIALSAND METHODS

Intercultural competence involves an awareness of the role of language competences in intercultural encounters. It also involves an awareness that, within intercultural encounters (as in all interactions), participants may have different levels of competence in the language(s) being used, which can create asymmetries or power differentials within the interaction. More generally, how people interpret, and communicate within, intercultural encounters is shaped by the languages and cultures which they bring to those encounters.

An individual's intercultural competence is never complete but can always be enriched still further from continuing experience of different kinds of intercultural encounter. While the definition of intercultural competence provided above states that such competence involves respecting people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself, it is important to distinguish between respect for people and respect for actions.

Several aspects of intercultural competence warrant further comment. First, intercultural competence does not involve abandoning one's own cultural identifications or affiliations, nor does it require individuals to adopt the cultural practices, beliefs, discourses or values of other cultures.

Second, because intercultural competence involves learning about and interpreting other people's cultural perspectives and relating them to one's own, interculturally competent individuals are able to use their intercultural encounters to learn about and reflect critically on their own cultural affiliations.

Third, it is important to emphasize that language has a privileged role within intercultural encounters because it is the most important (although not the

only) symbolic system which enables group members to share their cultural perspectives, beliefs and values.

Fourth, it is important to acknowledge that intercultural competence alone may not always be sufficient to enable individuals to engage in successful intercultural dialogue. Intercultural competence can be developed in different ways through different types of education. Three types of education exist and for the purposes of this paper are defined:

1. Informal education means the lifelong process whereby every individual acquires attitudes, skills and knowledge from the educational influences and resources in his or her own environment and from daily experience and conversation (family, peer group, neighbours, encounters, library, mass media, work, play, etc.).

2. Non-formal education means any planned programme of education designed to improve a range of skills and competences outside the formal educational setting, and throughout lifelong learning.

3. Formal education means the structured education and training system that runs from pre-primary and primary through secondary school and on to higher education. It takes place, as a rule, at general or vocational educational institutions

and usually leads to certification. Each type of education involves a relationship between a facilitator of learning and learners

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experience, comparison, analysis, reflection and co-operative action, as briefly outlined above, are most effectively implemented in non-formal and formal education if teaching and learning *methods* are in line with the educational aim of developing intercultural competence in any subject matter. There is much research indicating that learners learn better in contexts where lecturing from the front and transmitting information is minimal, and where pedagogical approaches, methods and techniques that encourage learners to

become actively involved in discovery, challenge, reflection and co-operation are used instead. The most effective learning activities engage learners as whole persons and address their intellectual, emotional and physical potential. This also applies to the development of intercultural competence.

Many innovative teaching techniques and work forms are now increasingly widespread with the aim of facilitating the learning process in both non-formal and formal education. Project work, for example, has become very popular in the teaching of many subjects in schools. It involves topic- or theme-based tasks suitable for various levels and ages, in which goals and content are negotiated by all participants, and learners create their own learning materials that they present and evaluate together. Naturally, with such new work forms and new approaches to the learning process, teachers' and learners' roles have also changed.

Such activities that analyse multiple perspectives can be used in non-formal or formal educational settings to develop intercultural competence. For example,

historical events are often described differently by two historians living in different parts of the world and writing in different languages. In the same way as portraits of the same person are painted differently by two artists, drawings of a classroom sketched by people sitting in different corners of the same classroom will also be different. World maps based on projections not usually encountered, or using maps upside down, may stimulate discussion on points of view that are frequent or dominant, and others that are less customary. The same is true for descriptions of natural phenomena that are often presented in natural science classes. While variations on this activity develop participants' observation and communication skills, they also promote analysis from multiple perspectives, enhance empathy and non-judgmental attitudes, and highlight the misleading nature of first impressions and stereotypes. Comparing perspectives can also be used in the treatment of real conflicts among the members of any

group or class, or even within a family, to develop the same skills and attitudes while solving the involved persons' own conflicts or problems.

Multiperspectivity can also be enhanced through storytelling and the construction of narratives by learners. The narration of stories, which could be real or fictional, involves the ability to narrate whilst taking the perspective of specific people involved and distinguishing these from one's own perspective. Such narrations help participants to decentre from their own values, norms and beliefs, and from what is normally taken for granted, and the explanation of matters that would otherwise be omitted. This process may be fuelled by an audience's questions in informal settings, but it can also be designed as such in non-formal and formal education. Stories in the latter settings could be purposely drawn from the learners' own biographies, which can also be pulled together (e.g. through "American quilt" or puzzle activities where each biography forms a piece of the puzzle) to exemplify the group's diversity and to facilitate learners in exploring each other as complex individuals beyond over-simplified identities and labels which constrain members' understanding of each other. Finally, beyond the discussion of each individual biography or story, the compilation of all of them creates yet another level of rich pedagogical material which can be further analysed, discussed and reflected upon in relation to, for example, the kinds of diversity encountered in the group, whether or how it is related to the broader social context, or the kinds of socio-historical influences that brought it about. Role play, simulation and drama activities in foreign, second or native language and literature classes or in non-formal educational settings can help develop learners' intercultural competence. For example, teachers or facilitators can give out role cards according to which learners have to act completely differently from their usual ways, norms and standards. In addition, they have to solve a problem, carry out a task or discuss an issue in groups following the norms of their assigned "new identity".

The benefits of role plays, simulations and drama for the development of intercultural competence are numerous. Learners experience what it is like to be different, to be looked on strangely, to be criticised or even excluded. They can also discover that, although people may show differences in every aspect from eye contact through language use to basic norms, beliefs and values, these differences do not make them less valuable as human beings. The debriefing discussion with the class or group is very important after each role play or simulation to raise awareness of what happened during the game. Eliciting from the students or participants what they have discovered while playing – what was easy, difficult, strange or life-like, how they were able to imagine the norms of their assigned "new identity" and whether their character was genuine or stereotypical – will help them reflect on the experience. As a result, such activities can help to develop attitudes of openness, curiosity and respect, as well as a willingness to empathise and suspend judgment. Students are also encouraged to develop skills of observation and interpretation, skills for learning about one's own culture and discovering others, as well as skills of adapting and empathy.

Care has to be taken that such activities do not lead to over-generalisations about other groups of people, and that they do not reinforce stereotypes instead of
challenging them. When stereotypes surface in the discussions, either about the self or about the other, the teacher or facilitator can seize such opportunities to discuss these and support learners in reflecting about how stereotypes are created, why they are sustained, how they can be as harmful as helpful and how they need to be challenged. When appropriately implemented, such role plays, simulations and drama also raise awareness of and build knowledge about similarities and differences, assumptions and prejudices, and verbal and non-verbal communicative conventions.

Another group of activities that helps to develop intercultural competence is theatre, poetry and creative writing. When we watch or read plays in our spare time because someone in the family or among our friends or colleagues recommended them, we learn about other people of diverse cultural affiliations with a variety of perspectives. Reading plays in literature or foreign language classes helps students learn from and through theatre in many different ways. Staging theatrical works takes this learning even further as acting out enables people to explore and reflect on experiences that they would probably never encounter otherwise.

Many short stories and poems also lend themselves well to the development of intercultural competence. They can be read, enjoyed, discussed, illustrated with

drawings, retold or even – with a little bit of imagination and creative writing skills – rewritten from the learners' own perspectives. These learning activities based on literature, obviously appropriate for the language or literature class but also adaptable to other subject matter, allow learners to gain knowledge about people they have never met and to learn about lives they have never imagined. These processes can help learners to develop a willingness to question what is usually taken for granted in their own environment and to challenge their stereotypes of other people. Depending on the content or message of the poem, short story or play that teachers and facilitators select for use, these activities may even help learners understand how society and individuals can protect the dignity and human rights of people regardless of their cultural affiliations.

Ethnographic tasks involve learners in going outside to explore life in the real world in order to bring back experience and knowledge that they can compare,

analyse and reflect on – a process which can also promote self-discovery and self-reflection. Learners in a class or participants in non-formal training sessions can be assisted in compiling an observation grid to explore how people greet

each other, how long they wait in certain situations, what verbal and non-verbal means they use to express respect, gratitude, anger or any other emotions. Another task could be for them to interview people to find out how people in a certain neighbourhood live, think or relate to specific questions. The results can again be presented, compared and analysed in the classroom or training room in order to develop some of the attitudes, knowledge or skills required for intercultural competence. These reflective discussions about the learners' ethnographic experiences will help them think about their reactions to what they observed, especially their interpretations of why they reacted in certain ways and not others to what they had experienced during 'field work'.

Parents can also make conscious decisions to organise outings for their children where they can observe and learn about the norms, behaviour or social practices of people with different cultural affiliations and belonging to different ethnic, religious or socio-economic groups. These opportunities can be used to compare and raise awareness of their own norms and practices. A related but distinct methodology within ethnographic approaches is oral history. In non-formal and formal educational settings, oral history can be an approach mobilised by facilitators, trainers or teachers for engaging learners with the past through the use of interviews with people as "living sources", and through the process of developing social science research ethics towards others and their views of the past. As interviews need to be conducted with sensitivity, patience and as little influence on the interviewee as possible, learners acquire experience of active listening, respecting other views or accounts and allowing, indeed facilitating, these to be voiced even if they do not fully agree with them. *Multiperspectivity* is also practised here, since a grandfather's memories from school may be quite different from those of a grandmother, for example. Witnessing oral history may also be relevant in informal education when, for example, grandparents narrate stories of their childhood to grandchildren. Younger generations are often surprised at the differences between how they are

growing up, playing and attending school and how these activities were experienced by parents and grandparents. They may also be surprised when grandparents relate how they challenged the cultural norms of the time through their own life choices, despite the fact that these norms were broader then. Although such conversations may often happen in an incidental manner, they provide opportunities for learners to explore how their own culture is in constant change over time, and how cultures are often challenged from within.

CONCLUSION

Intercultural encounters have now become an everyday occurrence for large numbers of people in many countries. Such high levels of physical and virtual intercultural contact have the potential to lead to self-enrichment and benefit, since encountering otherness, or what is perceived to be different, provides an opportunity for learning from, with and about each other and about oneself. Developing intercultural competence through education is a powerful tool for achieving intercultural understanding, appreciation and respect. The successful development of intercultural competence, and the realisation of the social vision upon which it is based, relies crucially upon the commitment and support of a wide range of stakeholders, including politicians, policy makers, education and training professionals, religious, spiritual and community leaders, parents and carers, and of course learners themselves. To enable the development of intercultural competence through education, the committed support of all these stakeholders is required.

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