

# TEACHING LANGUAGES FOR INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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## Introduction

Learning a foreign language is more than a simple task of assembling lexical items in grammatically accurate sentences. It involves fundamentally learning to communicate with others in that language and such communication involves an engagement with culture. In this paper, I want to present one particular approach to teaching language and culture in an integrated way with the aim of developing in language learners the ability to understand, reflect on and mediate cultures as a part of their language learning experience. In beginning this task, it is important to clarify a number of assumptions about language learning, communication and culture which underlie the thinking in this paper:

- Communication is an act of sociality: that is it is not simply the case that information is transferred from one participant to another, but rather language is used to create and maintain social relationships. This means that we cannot view language in terms of a contrast between interactional (social) and transactional (information-exchange) discourse, but rather as a pervading social act in which information exchange may be one of the relevant activities going on.
- Language is a marker of identity and to use a language is an act of social identity in that it encodes how the speaker is presenting him/herself in a particular interaction. Language use involves the expression of self not just the expression of ideas and intentions.
- Language learners are also language users and it is inappropriate to see a dichotomy between these two characterisations. Language learners use language to express ideas and the present the own identities regardless of proficiency.
- Second language communication is intercultural communication. This may seem obvious, but it is always important to remember that when a person uses their second language they are encoding ideas in a linguistic system which is located within a cultural context and which will be interpreted as being located within that context. Language learners have to engage with culture as they communicate.
- Second language communication is bilingual. This means that the communicative resources available to second language users are different from those available to monolingual speakers of the language. Bilinguals need to be able to mediate linguistic codes and cultural contexts as a regular part of their interaction.

These assumptions about the nature of (second) language use raise some questions for the way in which language teaching and learning are conceived.

- What is culture for communication?
- How can intercultural competence be taught?
- How is intercultural competence acquired?

## What is culture for communication?

In searching for an answer to this question in the context of language teaching and learning there are a number of issues which emerge as important for practice.

The first of these is that culture is practice which is accomplished and realized by members of a cultural group in their daily lives and interactions. This means that culture in the context of language learning needs to go beyond behaviors, texts, artifacts and information as manifestations of culture and examine the ways in which these things are accomplished discursively within a context of use. This means that culture learning becomes an engagement with cultural practices rather than exposure to information about a culture and that the cultural competence to be developed through language learning takes the form of intercultural behavior in and through the language being learned.

Viewing culture as a dynamic set of practices rather than as a body of shared information engages the idea of individual identity as a more central concept in understanding culture. Culture is a framework in which the individual achieves his/her identity using a cultural group's understandings of choices made by members as a resource for the presentation of the self. This reflects Sacks' (1984) notion of 'doing being ordinary': who we are is an interactionally accomplished product not an inherent quality and the culture provides a reference point for this interactional accomplishment. Such a view encourages us to think of the individual as a semiotic system, that is, as a set of meaningful choices about the presentation of self. Culture provides a context in which this semiotic is to be read and choices will be understood differently in different cultural contexts. This means that for the second language user doing being ordinary involves presenting the self within a different framework of conventions for reading the individual. Language learning provides a challenge for identity in two key ways. First it raises the question "who am I when I speak this language?" and secondly "How am I when I speak this language?".

When culture is viewed as dynamic practice it gives a way of dealing with culture as variable. We move away from the idea of the national culture and the idea of a monolithic 'French culture' or 'Japanese culture' and recognize that culture varies with time, place and social category and for age, gender, religion, ethnicity and sexuality. Different people participate in different groups and have multiple memberships of within their cultural group each of which can and does affect the presentation of the self within the cultural context. The variability is not limited however to membership of sub-cultures but also to the ways in which the individual participates within his/her cultures. People can resist, subvert or challenge the cultural practices to which they are exposed in both their first culture and in additional cultures they acquire.

A view of culture as practices indicates that culture is complex and that individual's relationships with culture are complex. Adding an additional language and culture to an individual's repertoire expands the complexity, generates new possibilities and creates a need for mediation between languages and cultures and the identities which they frame. This means that language learning involves the development of an intercultural competence which facilitates such meditation. Intercultural competence involves at least the following:

- Accepting that one's own and others' behavior is culturally determined.
- Accepting that there is no one right way to do things.
- Valuing one's own culture and other cultures.
- Using language to explore culture.
- Finding personal solutions in intercultural interaction.
- Using L1 culture as a resource to learn about L2 culture.
- Finding an intercultural style and identity.

Intercultural competence means centrally being aware that cultures are relative. That is, being aware that there is no one "normal" way of doing things, but rather that all behaviours are culturally variable. Applied to a particular language it also involves knowing some of the common cultural conventions which are used by speakers of the language. The emphasis here is on some. Given the volume, variability and potential for change of the cultural conventions, it is impossible to learn them all and certainly well beyond the scope of any classroom acquisition. Because a learner can only ever acquire some of the cultural conventions, an important part of intercultural competence is having strategies for learning more about culture as they interact.

## How can intercultural competence be taught?

The discussion so far provides an argument for teaching culture in a particular way. What I want to do in the remainder of the paper is present an approach to teaching language and culture together in the framework of ILT. This approach has, in particular been developed with my colleague Chantal Crozet in a number of recent papers (Crozet, 1996; Crozet and Liddicoat, 1999; Liddicoat, 2000; Liddicoat, 2002; Liddicoat and Crozet, 2001). The approach involves opportunities to reflect on one's own culture, to experiment with the new culture and to decide how one wishes to respond to cultural differences.

The approach divides language and culture teaching into four stages:

1. Awareness-raising
2. Skills development
3. Production
4. Feedback

## **Awareness-raising**

The awareness-raising stage is where the learners are introduced to new input about language and culture. New input should be introduced through participative tasks which encourage the learner to compare the new culture with their own practices.

Ideally the learner should have an opportunity to notice differences between the new input and their own culture, with the teacher supporting them in noticing differences. Schmidt (1993) has made the argument that language learning happens most readily when students themselves notice things about the language and this applied equally to language and culture learning (Liddicoat and Crozet, 2001). It is especially important that students have the opportunity to think about and talk about what they notice, either in their first language, or if their proficiency is adequate in the second language.

Students' noticings are followed up wherever possible with an explanation of the function of particular actions in the target language to assist them in developing an explanatory framework for understanding what the speaker is doing. This explanation does not have to be deep, nor does it have to be detailed. Most importantly, it needs to be seen as being a normal way of acting. Some teachers may worry that as non-native speakers, they do not have enough insight into the other culture to teach it. However, being a native speaker is not always an advantage either, because in an intercultural approach, the teacher needs to know something about both cultures. Because ILT is comparative and is based on learning to notice differences, the important element is the exploration of difference rather than teaching difference and this is something teachers and students can do together. In particular, teachers' experiences of intercultural communication, especially of problems, can lead to insights about language and culture.

For awareness raising authentic video materials are particularly useful, as are cartoons, stories, etc. However some materials designed specifically for language learners may 'edit out' or 'nativise' cultural information in order to focus on language giving students a distorted picture of the culture (c.f. Kramsch, 1987).

## **Skills development**

This stage allows students to begin working with their new knowledge and trying out native speakers ways of acting and speaking. This involves short, supported communicative tasks which practice elements of the new knowledge and helps to build towards overall learning for a new speech situation. This work involves picking apart some of the language and cultural needs of the students for focussed practice. Ideally experimentation should occur immediately after awareness raising to help fix their newly noticed knowledge through experiential learning.

## **Production**

In this stage, students put together the elements they have been trying out in the experimentation phase and integrate the information they have acquired in actual language use. The best way to achieve this is through role plays, preferably unscripted role plays if the students are at a stage to be able to do these. In the role plays, they will need to act out the cultural and linguistics information that they have been practising so far. In essence, they try out being a native speaker of the language. The aim is for them to experience culturally different ways of interacting. In part this involves the students in experiencing the impact of using a different set of cultural rules on their identity and experiencing the comfort or discomfort this can bring.

## **Feedback**

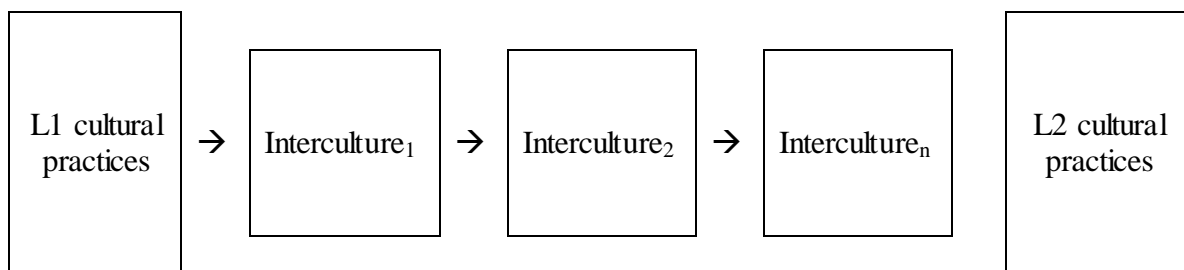
This is an important part of the activity and involves reflecting on the experience of acting like a native speaker in the production phase. During this phase, the student discusses with the teacher how s/he felt about speaking and acting in a particular way. This allows the teacher to comment on the language use of the student, but also allows the student to express how they felt. The feedback should allow the student to work towards discovering a “third place”: a place of comfort between their first language and culture and their second (Crozet and Liddicoat, 1999; 2000; Kramsch, 1993)

Some aspects of using a new language and culture are difficult or uncomfortable, others can be liberating. In engaging with a new set of practices, questions of identity are important and even very small cultural differences can produce quite strong emotional reactions. In the feedback, it is important to recognise the positives and negatives students express and to acknowledge the validity of these feelings.

Negative feelings are particularly important as they have strong implications for future interaction in the language. If a learner is unable to use the culturally contexted practices comfortably, s/he needs to develop ways of facilitating interaction without using these practices. Simple avoidance is rarely adequate as the practices involved are read by potential interlocutors in particular ways and avoidance may lead to unwanted and/or unintended readings of the speaker. One solution is to explain avoidance of uncomfortable cultural practices in terms of the user's first culture. Such explanation requires conscious awareness of the practice and its significance and allows the users him/herself to frame the way in which avoidance should be read. An alternative solution may involve the development of an intermediary practice which is acceptable from both the user's first culture perspective and also from the interlocutor's cultural perspective. Such intermediary practices involve decentring from the first culture but do not involve assimilating to the second culture and reflect a true intermediary ‘third’ position.

## How is intercultural competence acquired?

We can think of the process of cultural acquisition in ways which are analogous to language acquisition processes. The learner begins with a knowledge of the practices of their own first culture and gradually acquires an approximative system of practices (c.f. Nemser, 1971) which vary from the starting position as the result of exposure to new input. The approximative system, like interlanguage, can contain rules which are identical to those of the first culture, rules which are derived from the target culture and rules that belong to neither culture, but which are learner's accommodations to their noticing of and reflection on the input. We can think of these approximative systems as intercultural systems, with each intercultural system being a new step in the development of a set of intercultural practices, as in figure 3.



*Figure 3: progression in developing intercultural systems*

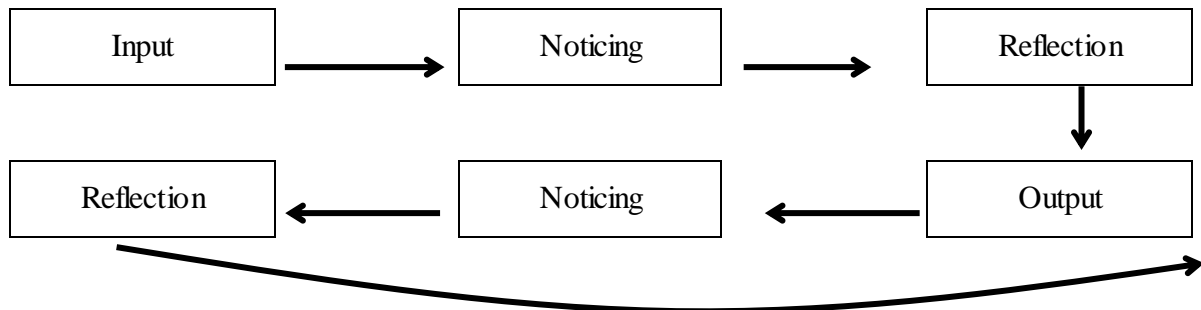
However, such a view of the acquisition of culture is problematic as it assumes a progression towards more native-like ways of behaving and that intermediate systems show both what has been acquired and what has yet to be acquired. The focus here is an orientation towards the product in acquisition and says little about the process.

The view of intercultural competence which has been presented here stands at odds with such a view of acquisition in a number of ways. First, it does not see assimilation to the target culture norms as the goal of learning, rather it is the development of an intermediate position which is the key goal. Any intermediate position is therefore not an approximation to another system, but a potential solution to the problem of mediating between two (or more) cultural frameworks. Secondly, it assumes that the starting point (i.e. the first culture) is somehow left behind as the learner progresses. This view denies the importance of identity and cultural attachment in the process of acquisition and ignores the need to mediate positions rather than to replace one position with another. Thirdly, the progression implies movement from the starting point (first culture) towards the end point (target culture) with progress seen as becoming less like the starting point and more like the end point and this implies assimilation to a culture as the aim of learning and the involvement of only one cultural framework in target language contexts. This denies the multiplicity inherent in bilingual communication. Fourthly, it equates production with acquisition. As the core of intercultural competence is awareness, production is not a good indicator of competence. Learning is shown by the understandings which underlie production of a behaviour or withholding of a behaviour. In fact, non-native-like production may indicate a high level of intercultural competence if

the behaviour is seen in terms of mediating two cultures rather than assimilation to a target (Liddicoat, 2002).

In contrast to this, a more process oriented approach to acquisition sees developing intercultural competence as an on-going process of acquisition and the primary tool for this development is reflecting on one's own linguistic behaviour and that of one's interlocutors.

The process of developing intercultural competence is cyclical, as shown in figure 2.



*Figure 2: a pathway for developing intercultural competence*

As with all language acquisition, acquisition culture through language begins with input. For any acquisition to take place, however, particular elements of the input have to be noticed (Schmidt, 1993). As mentioned above, our cultural conventions are often invisible to us and noticing a cultural difference can be made more difficult because of this. The promotion of noticing is one of the key tasks of the intercultural language teacher. Once it has been noticed, the input is available for reflection and experimentation. In ILT it is important for the student who has noticed a difference in the input to reflect on the nature of the difference and to decide how to respond to that difference; that is, how far the learner will modify his/her practices to accommodate to this new input. This decision is then introduced and leads to output in the language using an a modified set of norms. This initial modification is not, however, the final stage as the output itself provides opportunities for new noticing (Swain, 1985). This noticing may be a positive or negative evaluation of the new modified practices by the learner: the new practices may feel comfortable or uncomfortable, or it may be a noticing of a native speakers response to the modified practices of the learner, which indicate that the modification has been either successful or unsuccessful. These noticings become the target of further reflection, which again becomes realized in the output of the student, and so in a (potentially) continuous cycle of acquisition.

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