

# INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AS A TOOL FOR AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years the concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has started to spread in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. ICC is based on the development by the learner of several “savoirs” concerned with attitudes and values, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction and critical cultural awareness. In ICC, students become the centre of the teaching and learning process and the role of teachers should be focused on encouraging autonomous and independent learning skills in their students.

KEY WORDS: Intercultural communicative competence, foreign language teaching and learning, teaching and learning autonomy.

## RESUMEN

En los últimos años el concepto de competencia comunicativa intercultural (CCI) ha comenzado a extenderse en el campo de la enseñanza y aprendizaje de la enseñanza de idiomas. La CCI se basa en el desarrollo por parte del estudiante de varios “savoirs” relacionados con las actitudes y los valores, el conocimiento, las habilidades de interpretar y relacionar, las habilidades de descubrir e interactuar y la conciencia cultural crítica. En CCI, los estudiantes se convierten en el centro del proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje y la función de los profesores debería centrarse en fomentar las habilidades del aprendizaje autónomo e independiente en sus estudiantes.

PALABRAS CLAVE: competencia comunicativa intercultural, enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras, enseñanza y aprendizaje autónomo.

## 1. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

In recent years the concept of intercultural communicative competence (ICC) has been spreading in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. ICC is based on the development by the learner of several “savoirs” —as Byram (“Acquiring,” *Teaching*) calls them— concerned with attitudes and values, knowl-



edge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction and critical cultural awareness. ICC is the result of the introduction and/or revision by different authors of other models of competence. Noam Chomsky (*Syntactic Aspects*) introduced the concept of “linguistic competence” as the aim to be achieved by any speaker. A few years later Hymes proposed the concept of “communicative competence” adding the ability to discern when and how to use language in specific contexts to the sheer linguistic ability when speaking. The idea was further developed and enlarged by authors such as Canale and Swain in the early 1980s in the United States and by Van Ek in the mid 1980s in Europe. Canale and Swain split communicative competence (CC) into several aspects or competences: “grammatical competence,” “sociolinguistic competence” and “strategic competence.” Van Ek emphasized the idea that language teaching is not concerned merely with training in communication skills but must also involve the personal and social development of the learner as an individual, and, therefore, he presented a framework for comprehensive foreign language objectives which included aspects such as social competence, the promotion of autonomy or the development of social responsibility (33). He also broke CC into six dimensions or competences: “linguistic competence,” “sociolinguistic competence,” “discourse competence,” “strategic competence,” “socio-cultural competence” and “social competence.” Both models had many similarities and the main difference lay in the incorporation by Van Ek of two more points of view, the “socio-cultural” and the “social competence,” which, on the one hand, took into account values and beliefs and, on the other, attitudes and behaviours.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of connecting culture and attitude with foreign language learning and teaching was not something completely new. Regarding culture, the concept of intercultural communication (IC) had already appeared in the 1930s in connection with cross-cultural psychology (Guilherme 133), and flourished in the post-war years when researchers realised that some knowledge on aspects such as organisational behaviour, educational systems, civic studies, anthropology or psychology influenced the success of business, military and diplomatic personnel on placements in foreign countries (Mughan 62) and, over the years, cultural aspects have continued to gain importance, especially in these areas. Since those early times, many other authors have presented models for introducing culture in the foreign language classroom.<sup>2</sup> With respect to attitude, Baxter (307-311) draws on several authors already working in the 1970s in order to describe the characteristics of an effective intercultural communicator.

CC had prevailed for over three decades in foreign language teaching but, despite the inclusion of some cultural aspects, as we have already explained, accord-

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<sup>1</sup> Other revisions of the concept of CC have been carried out from different perspectives, for instance, pragmatics (see Celce-Murcia).

<sup>2</sup> Guilherme (132-146) revises several of these models from Brislin and Yoshieda's in 1934 to the recent Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001).



ing to Claire Kramsch, “[a]fter years of communicative euphoria, some language teachers are becoming dissatisfied with purely functional uses of language [and s]ome are pleading to supplement the traditional acquisition of ‘communication skills’ with some intellectually legitimate, humanistically oriented, cultural ‘content’” (“Cultural” 83). So, it was only natural that someone would make the connection between CC and IC. Although Baxter introduced the idea of ICC as early as 1983 (304), it is Michael Byram who, since the mid 1990s, has most extensively developed the concept and the applications of ICC.

According to Byram, when persons from different languages and/or countries interact socially they bring to the situation their knowledge about their own country and that of the others’. Part of the success of such interaction will depend on the establishing and maintenance of human relationships, which depends on attitudinal factors. At the same time, both aspects, knowledge and attitude, are influenced by the processes of intercultural communication, that is, the skills of interpretation and establishing relationships between aspects of the two cultures and the skills of discovery and interaction. Finally, all these factors should be integrated within a philosophy of political education and develop the learners’ critical cultural awareness of all the cultures involved (*Teaching* 32-33). Byram presents these factors as “savoirs” to be acquired or developed by the learner:

- “savoir être,” which is concerned with attitudes and values and consists in showing curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one’s own;
- “savoirs,” which refers to the knowledge of social groups and their products and practices in one’s own and in one’s interlocutor’s country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction;
- “savoir comprendre,” related to the skills of interpreting and relating, that is to say, the ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one’s own;
- “savoir apprendre/faire,” connected to the skills of discovery and interaction or the ability to acquire new knowledge of a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction;
- “savoir s’engager,” in relation to critical cultural awareness and/or political education, which means having the ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries (Byram, “Acquiring” 57-66, *Teaching* 31-54).

When defining the different “savoirs,” no linguistic aspects have been mentioned and all the focus has been on culture and the relationship between cultures, that is to say, interculturality. We should not forget, though, that interculturality means interaction, and interaction is communication, to wit, language of one kind or another. In any case, Byram introduces the possibility of distinguishing between both competences: in IC, individuals have the ability to interact in their own language with people from another country and culture, drawing upon their knowledge



about intercultural communication, their attitudes of interest in otherness and their skills in interpreting, relating and discovering; whereas in ICC, interaction takes place between people from different cultures and countries in a foreign language, the knowledge of the participants of another culture is linked to their language competence through their ability to use language appropriately and their awareness of the specific meaning, values and connotations of the language (*Teaching* 70-71).

## 2. THE LEARNER AS INTERCULTURAL SPEAKER

The idea that the language presented in the classroom should be as authentic as possible so as to represent the reality of the native speaker language use has been one of the tenets of the communicative approach to foreign language teaching and learning (Jensen 30; Alptekin 61) and very often the implicit aim has been to imitate the native speaker (Byram et al., *Developing the 9*). Taking the native speaker as the model for CC has been another reason that has led to the revision of this concept and the move on to ICC. The problem with taking the native speaker as a model is that he/she becomes an impossible target for the learner, who will inevitably end up frustrated. As Cook has put it, “the prominence of the native speaker in language teaching has obscured the distinctive nature of the successful L2 user and created an unattainable goal for L2 learners” (185). Even in the case that the learner should manage to acquire this degree of perfection, it might not be the correct kind of competence as it would mean that the learner has to abandon one language in order to blend into another linguistic environment, thus becoming linguistically schizophrenic (Byram, *Teaching* 11). It also means that the learner’s native language is completely left aside in the process of learning a foreign language, when it could be usefully introduced to give confidence to the student and trigger interest in some topics or aspects to be dealt with in the classroom.

Taking the native speaker as a model also implies that the cultural aspects taken into account are also those of the target language, leaving the learner’s own culture in a peripheral position or even ignoring it completely (Alptekin 62; Oliveras Vilaseca 34). It might also happen that the learner would voluntarily refuse to adopt the cultural standards underlying the verbal and nonverbal behaviours of native speaker (Baxter 303), as often occurs with immigrants who opt for partial divergence from the norms as a strategy of identity maintenance (House 19). Another aspect to be taken into account is that in the present situation where most speakers of English in the world do not have it as their mother tongue, the terms “native” or “native-like” do not seem to be appropriate in the evaluation of communicative competence (Savignon 210).

In fact, Byram (*Teaching* 22) describes how we can find ourselves in a variety of communicative situations: participants with different languages and nationalities where only one of them is a native speaker; participants with different languages and nationalities where none of them is a native speaker, as they are using a specific language as a *lingua franca*; and even participants with the same nationality



but different mother tongues where only one of them is a native speaker of the language used. All this also affects culture since, in our present world, learners of a foreign language will find themselves more and more often in situations where they have to understand the relationships between different cultures and will have to make sense of different behaviours and attitudes. They will have to become mediators trying to interpret and connect two or more ways of understanding the world (Byram “Acquiring” 54). This is so because we are living in a complex world with new requirements concerning linguistic and cultural qualifications in people and we have to be able to deal with this complexity, both productively and receptively, at local level (in a micro-context) and also in global situations (macro-contexts) (Risager, “Teacher’s” 15; Jæger 54). Such learners need to function fully in a situation where at least two languages and two cultures, their own and another one, interplay and they may find themselves in a no-man’s-land or, more exactly, in a “third place” from which they must understand and mediate between the home and the target language and culture (Kramersch, *Context* 233-259). Learners have to become mediators who have the ability to manage communication and interaction between people of different cultural identities and languages, coming from their own perspective and taking up another, able to handle different interpretations of reality, that is, learners must become intercultural speakers.

The replacement of the native speaker as a reference point for the foreign language learner by the intercultural speaker, a mediator of both languages and cultures, was introduced by Byram and Zarate. But being a mediator implies building bridges between language and cultures, therefore, in the process of learning a new foreign language and becoming an intercultural speaker, the first language or other previously acquired languages cannot be suppressed; in fact, the speaker goes through a “third way” or a hybridisation process, as House has called it (18), where the “old cultures” are still recognisable in the new one. Other authors, however, place more emphasis on the idea that rather than not losing our previous knowledge what happens is that we share rules of interpretation that are applied to both familiar and new contexts to make sense of the world (Kramersch, *Language* 27) or, as Risager (“Language” 248) puts it, there is an interweaving of cultures, whose penetration into each other is strengthened by extensive migration and tourism, mass communication systems, supranational economic interdependence and globalisation in general.

We must observe that the change of goal from the native speaker to the intercultural speaker should not in any way be seen as lowering the standards of achievement currently expected of the language learner, it is simply a question of changing one’s point of view and realising that the competence of the intercultural speaker and the native speaker is not the same linguistically or culturally (Steele 77). Actually, House points out that the intercultural speaker may deliberately make cultural alternations, which should not be regarded as the effect of cultural transfer from one language to another or as ignorance of a second culture but rather as a clear sign of the intercultural competence they possess (6). In fact, the intercultural speaker can be considered to be in a privileged position with respect to the native speaker regarding communication and interaction with people from other cultures and with



other languages. It may also seem that by relaxing the requirements on the learner and allowing the intercultural speaker to retain his/her social, linguistic and cultural baggage, he/she is in an easier position; however, the intercultural speaker is a dynamic concept with no specific goal or limits and the learner must always be ready to acquire more knowledge and more abilities (Jaeger 53). The acquisition of ICC is never complete, since it is not possible to anticipate all the knowledge the learner might need at all times and in all situations (Byram et al., *Developing the* 11), and therefore, acquiring ICC, becoming an intercultural speaker, is a lifelong activity.

In Steele's opinion, one of the advantages of taking this intercultural speaker as a model is that this concept places the learner at the centre of the teaching and learning process, something that fits with the learner-centred methodology that has been widely adopted as an effective way of teaching a foreign language (79). This idea is also present in the theory of cultural community building within English language programmes, proposed, for instance, by Margaret Coffey, where a first step in community building is that teachers should give up some control in the classroom and share power with students (28). For her, building a cultural community means fostering meaningful communication among all group members when they do not share a common worldview. In order to do this, apart from sharing power with our students, we have to encourage them to be tolerant of ambiguity, foster empathy as well as cooperation and build an understanding of cultural values; as we can see, all these aims are completely in agreement with those of ICC. Other authors (Jaeger 53; Cesevièiūtė and Minkutė-Henrickson 55) also share the idea that the primary role of the teacher in ICC is to develop students' autonomous and independent learning skills.

### 3. AUTONOMOUS LEARNING AND TEACHING THROUGH ICC

We have just seen that in ICC the role of the learner changes and, therefore, the role of the teacher is also bound to be different. ICC goes beyond the concept of language learning as just acquiring skills in a language accompanied by some factual knowledge about a country where the language is spoken. The teacher now becomes a mediator, a "gatekeeper" according to some authors (Alptekin 58), who should give priority not to the amount of knowledge to be acquired but to the development of new attitudes, skills and critical awareness in the student. That is to say, the task of the teacher is not to provide comprehensive information or bring the foreign society into the classroom for learners to observe and experience but to develop in students the competence that will help them relativise their own cultural values, beliefs and behaviours and investigate for themselves the otherness, what is different from their "norm" (Risager, "Teacher's"; Byram et al. *Developing* 3, *Developing the* 13, 33). This teacher would be what we might call an "intercultural teacher," that is, a teacher who can help students see the connections between their own and other cultures, as well as awaken their curiosity about difference and otherness. In this context non-native teachers, who can move between the home and the target cul-



tures, might seem to be in a better position; however, a curious, open-minded native teacher, especially if widely travelled, would not be at a disadvantage (Corbett 12). In fact, the best teacher will not be defined as native speaker or non-native speaker but rather the person who can help students see the connections between their own and other cultures, as well as awaken their curiosity about difference and otherness.

Byram considers that certain objectives of ICC, for instance those he refers to as discovery skills, can be included as part of the curriculum; however, there are others which may not be compatible with classroom work, especially as it is usually conceived in foreign language teaching. Despite the fact that some difficulties may arise, he insists on the idea that ICC has to be integrated in the curriculum, and he talks about three possible locations for the acquisition of ICC: the classroom, fieldwork<sup>3</sup> and an independent learning environment. In each of these locations, the learner will manage to develop different aspects of ICC. The classroom is more suitable for the acquisition of, for instance, the “savoirs” and “savoir-comprendre,” that is, the knowledge dimension and the skills of interpreting and relating; whereas fieldwork, understood as an experience of a total environment or real time interaction, is favourable for the development of “savoir apprendre-faire,” which is connected with the skills of discovery and interaction. Finally, independent learning is part of the personal development of the learner and is connected to life-long learning (*Teaching* 64-70, 73). In fact, if learners manage to engage in independent learning in terms of intercultural communication, this reflects their ability to function independently of a teacher, which is the ultimate goal of foreign language learning (Ceseviūtė and Minkutė-Henrickson 54). Some discussions in the context of foreign language learning in general and the development of ICC in particular are often related to the concept of autonomy. However, we should be careful not to oversimplify this concept, as it does not mean simply designing strategies for self-directed learning or sending students to self-access centres to study on their own, and it should be in fact a more comprehensive notion. Language educators face a complex task of exploring the ways of developing students’ capacity for autonomous learning rather than trying to make them instantaneously adopt the principles of autonomous learning (Ceseviūtė and Minkutė-Henrickson 55).

Various authors have defended the idea that one of the best ways to develop ICC in general and autonomy in particular in foreign language learning is by introducing ethnographic skills.<sup>4</sup> Technically speaking, ethnography refers to an anthro-

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<sup>3</sup> For Byram (*Teaching* 68-69), in “fieldwork” there is a pedagogical structure and educational objectives determined by the teacher often in consultation with learners, and it is, in fact, the responsibility of the teacher to provide this pedagogical structure and systematic experience that differentiates fieldwork from independent experience. Fieldwork may be a short visit organised by a teacher for a group of learners or even a long-term period of residence organised for and by an individual learner, but always keeping a link with the classroom and the teacher.

<sup>4</sup> In the United Kingdom the introduction of ethnography into foreign language learning and teaching has been the result of the work of Byram and his associates, for instance, Byram *Teaching*; Byram and Morgan; Byram and Fleming; and Roberts et al.



pologist's description of a community through systematic observation, usually by living within the community as a participant observer over a period of time (Corbett 9). One of their original fields of work has been description of language behaviour within the community, but in recent years ethnography has widened its scope and includes a variety of research techniques in the media, cultural studies as well as other areas. The idea is not that students become professional anthropologists, but some training in ethnographic techniques, the introduction of discovery skills, can benefit the language learning process as students learn via observation and the gathering of data. The ethnographic approach matches many of the goals of communicative language teaching by seeking:

- an integration of linguistic and cultural learning to facilitate communication and interaction;
- a comparison of others and self to stimulate reflection on and (critical) questioning of the mainstream culture into which learners are socialised;
- a shift in perspective involving psychological processes of socialisation;
- the potential of language teaching to prepare learners to meet and communicate in cultures and societies other than the specific one usually associated with the language they are learning (Byram and Fleming 7, qtd. Corbett 35).

Of course, the ethnographic activities have to be adapted to the purpose and the level of the foreign learning classroom. The book *Developing Intercultural Competence in Practice* (Byram et al.), “a forum for reflection on the experience and practice of learning and teaching languages and intercultural competence” (vii), describes several experiences carried out by teachers in different parts of the world, most of which have an ethnographic component, where students have to collect information on a specific topic by means of research, interviews or mere observation of events or social and cultural products, that is, fieldwork. The data gathered will be presented and exploited in the classroom in different ways so that the students can improve both their language and intercultural competence. Most experiences presented in the book also prove that ethnographic activities can be used with students belonging to a wide range of ages, from young children to adults; a variety of cultural backgrounds, from barely literate people to university students; and a diversity of national origins: students from just one country, students from two countries working in partnership or immigrants from different countries working together. Another aspect these experiences show is that there is enough material to work with on our doorstep as almost any element around us is apt for use with order to trigger our curiosity and the development of our ICC.

Helping students to acquire ICC, and, for the students, acquiring it are not easy tasks in the sense that, on the one hand, this acquisition requires willingness and acceptance on the part of the learner as it affects values and beliefs and, on the other, because it is an ever-developing competence where the learner must always be alert. That is the reason why some authors consider that culture and more specifically interculturality cannot be tested explicitly, because it is an “intensely individual quest” (Kramsch, *Context* 257); however, methods have been developed up





to the present.<sup>5</sup> One of the methods that has been considered as most appropriate to assess ICC is a portfolio that the learner has to build throughout the learning period. Byram defends the idea of using a portfolio for several reasons: first, because it allows a combination “atomised and holistic” assessment, that is, objective by objective, “savoir” by “savoir” or ICC as a whole; second, because it allows keeping a close relationship between testing and teaching; and, finally, because it permits a combination of criterion-referenced documentation with objective, norm-referenced tests (*Teaching* 107). The contents of the portfolio will obviously depend on the kind of course the learner is following, but it should always contain an element of critical reflection and, if possible, this should be discussed between the student and the teacher (Corbett 200). The concept of the portfolio has been developed within the context of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. This framework has different aims, among which we would like to highlight those of commitment to lifelong language learning and the idea that language study offers opportunities to acquire independence and autonomy as learners (Heyworth 13). In addition, the European Language Portfolio also had as one of its aims the development of learner responsibility and learner autonomy (Schärer 3).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

ICC is based on “savoirs,” that is, skills, abilities, values and attitudes, rather than the transmission of knowledge. This does not mean that traditional instruction or the gathering and structuring of information are banned in this competence. However, all these “savoirs” are acquired rather than taught and they depend very much on autonomous learning and teaching. One of the factors of ICC is “savoir apprendre/faire,” which is connected to the skills of discovery and the ability to acquire new knowledge through interaction. That is, emphasis is placed on learning to learn, a competence which will allow us to be independent and autonomous in any lifelong learning process in any field we may be involved in. More and more importance is given nowadays in education to the acquisition of this ability and to the idea that our learning process does not end at school or university, but continues throughout our whole life.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, the importance of the foreign language learner as an intercultural speaker comes to the fore. As we have seen, the intercultural speaker is a dynamic concept without specific limits, someone who is always in the making, ready to acquire new knowledge or abilities. Since his or her training is never complete, being an intercultural speaker is a lifelong activity and the learner must ac-

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<sup>5</sup> For a brief revision and references of some testing methods see Coperías Aguilar (252)

<sup>6</sup> The now-over-ten-year-old Bologna Process and the European higher education area place great emphasis on the idea of long-life learning processes. For an analysis of the relationship between ICC and higher education in this context see Coperías Aguilar (2009).



quire the skills of autonomous learning in order to succeed in any new situation that may arise. Thus the importance of the intercultural teacher, a mediator rather than a transmitter of knowledge and aware of the abilities which have to be taught, also becomes essential. However, it is not always easy to find the right methodologies to teach ICC, and the use of some ethnographic techniques may be useful. In my opinion, the theory and practices around the concept of ICC that have been presented throughout this paper, can be an adequate tool to encourage autonomous learning, specifically in foreign language teaching and learning, but also in other areas in general. The concept of ICC has so far been developed in connection with foreign language teaching and learning; however, some of its principles could also be applied to other areas of knowledge and to students coming from fields other than foreign languages.

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