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# LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGIES, INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

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## **Abstract**

This paper will examine familiar reasons for including the teaching of intercultural competence within Language Teaching before adding some less familiar ones. It will focus in particular on the question of how far intercultural competence can be learned when students are formally studying languages and how far such competence needs to be acquired autonomously. It will though also ask to what extent being initiated to the very varied facets of intercultural competence during formal language study plays an important role in allowing effective autonomous acquisition to take place. The paper will conclude that a significant part of the intercultural development that students need to undertake if they are to be able to communicate effectively in a foreign language must happen autonomously, but that it is, nonetheless, vital that language courses at least sow the seeds of intercultural learning in ways that will facilitate autonomous learning. As such, language courses, if they are genuinely to meet student needs, should incorporate elements of intercultural training. The paper also concludes by outlining the type of empirical research that would need to be carried out for these claims to be fully substantiated.

**Key words:** intercultural communication, intercultural competence, autonomous learning

## **Introduction**

I want in this paper to examine some of the reasons for including the teaching of intercultural competence within Language Teaching. I also want to ask how its inclusion may be linked to the autonomous acquisition of intercultural competence when students are not formally studying languages. I will start by clarifying the distinction between teaching methodology and curriculum aims and content. I will then go on to summarize some more familiar arguments as to why the intercultural dimension is a key part of communication in a foreign language, before going on to add some arguments which may be slightly less familiar which concern autonomous learning. I will conclude by examining what this would seem to imply for language teaching and what research remains to be done.

## **Teaching – Methodology, Curriculum and Student Needs**

A huge variety of methodologies are currently being used in foreign language teaching across the world. These go, for example, from methodologies which we might broadly term ‘Task-based’, with their emphasis on learning through authentic language activity to more ‘Communicative’ methodologies with their emphasis on the need to develop effective skills for communication, especially spoken communication. With a huge amount in between these methodologies then go on to those focusing more on ‘Grammar-Translation’ where grammatical and written forms have high priority and where translation is often amongst the pedagogical means employed. The ‘huge amount in between’ is in fact interculturally fascinating since it has often become so culturally hybrid, incorporating

elements of very different methodologies commonly employed in very different cultural contexts. There is a tendency, however, at times for these ‘methodologies’ to be thought of as different *means* of achieving the same end – namely, linguistic competence. The differences of ‘methodology’, however, in reality encompass far more. They involve in fact key differences in what linguistic competence is seen as including – i.e. differences in *ends*.

Now different areas of Applied Linguistics are constantly drawing attention to aspects of discourse of which competent speakers have mastery but which were not previously acknowledged. The intercultural dimension is a classic aspect of this kind. It is partly because a significant number of Applied Linguists, working in a wide range of contexts, have over time identified a whole range of forms of intercultural ability which are needed for effective use of a foreign language, that for many possession of these intercultural abilities has come to be seen as a ‘*student need*’ – i.e. something which students have a right to see included in the content of their curriculum.

### **Familiar reasons for including the intercultural dimension within Language Teaching**

Bennett (1997) talks of the ‘fluent fool’. By this he would seem to have in mind, in essence, a person who speaks ‘fluently’, probably with a good range of vocabulary, fairly accurate grammar and good pronunciation. Yet, at the same time, they speak ‘foolishly’ because of the cultural inappropriateness of what they often say. This cultural inappropriateness could take many forms – it could be that some aspect of their body language is common when associated with their first language but not with the foreign language they are speaking; they could be saying things in a manner which is within a common politeness code of their first language but which can be considered aggressive in the foreign language they are speaking; or they could be drawing on a stereotype widespread in their country of origin but potentially offensive in the foreign language environment in which they are functioning. Yet few language teaching ‘methodologies’, or better syllabi or curricula, systematically incorporate the development of the intercultural abilities needed to try to ensure appropriate communication in such areas. As a result, many language teaching methodologies risk not fully meeting student needs – they may not fully equip them with, at least at a basic level, the intercultural abilities they need to complement the vocabulary they have mastered, the grammar they have grasped and the listening, reading and other skills they have developed.

Many theorists in many countries, and from different theoretical perspectives, have tried to describe what the ‘fluent fool’ could be lacking – they have tried, that is, to describe what it is to be interculturally competent and what kinds of thing, therefore, might need to be added to many existing language courses. Naturally, and healthily, they don’t all agree even if there are important areas of consensus. In what follows, partly for the sake of brevity, but also because there is some element of consensus (cf. Byram, Gribkova and Starkey, 2002) to which I myself, to a degree, subscribe, I shall divide the areas where intercultural gaps are often identified into three – knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The domain of cultural ‘*knowledge*’ is, of course, endless. In almost every area of our behavior and functioning we are influenced by some form or other of cultural practice, narrative or value. And to that, of course, is to be added the huge variety of cultural practice within speakers of a single language. And yet, somehow, we need to prepare our language students for the unfamiliar in this area. We need, some might say, to prepare them for the unfamiliar in areas like non-verbal communication, discourse patterns, the balance between public and private in discourse; to prepare them for their encounters with radically different historical narratives of familiar events clashing with their cherished versions; and we need to prepare them to observe, to acquire cultural knowledge for themselves (cf. Corbett, 2010).

Turning to intercultural '*skills*', these too are endlessly varied in ways which are still some distance from having been fully articulated. Yet the skills students will need may well include the ability to function outside of their comfort zone, the ability to empathize not just with other people's psychological states but also with their cultural perspective and the ability, at times, to maintain a non-judgmental stance. They will also almost certainly need the 'meta' skills needed to assess their own competence in these kinds of areas and to know how to develop themselves in the skill areas where they are weaker.

Let me close briefly with intercultural '*attitudes*', which tend to cause educationalists committed to intercultural teaching more concern than knowledge and skills, partly because it is less clear that they can be taught at all and also because it is often considered unclear how far they can effectively be assessed. What probably is clear, however, is that someone who struggles to take the risks involved in speaking a foreign language or in being in a foreign environment, who lacks curiosity about the culture they are in or who tends to view the cultural practices and values they are most familiar with as superior, is unlikely, as a result of these attitudes, to be fully successful when speaking a foreign language. As such, whether or not these things can be taught in the context of structured language courses or not, one might at least argue that students need at the meta-level to be aware of the impact possession of such attitudes will have on their foreign language communication. And this in turn at least implies that students need to develop them in *some* context.

### **Less familiar reasons for including the intercultural dimension within Language Teaching**

I want now to introduce the main reason for including the intercultural dimension on which I want to focus in this paper, and I want to do so by initially considering a specific objection to the whole idea of introducing intercultural content into the languages curriculum. In fact, though, there are many objections in many of which I can myself see some validity. For example, some language teachers feel there is a serious danger that the curriculum will become overcrowded if intercultural content is added or that key priorities like speaking skills or grammatical mastery will lose ground. These are genuine dangers and there are serious questions, even if you accept that intercultural content should be taught, about how much time or emphasis it should get and whether it should be assessed. But the specific objection I wish to mention goes as follows - a speaker of a foreign language with a reasonable mastery of the language should survive long enough in a country where that language is spoken officially to allow them to acquire informally an acceptable level of cultural knowledge and intercultural skills. It is not, however, obvious that the reverse applies - if a student has a reasonable level of cultural knowledge plus relevant skills and attitudes, will that allow them to survive in a foreign country and to acquire informally an acceptable grasp of the official language? This is at least not obvious. The implied conclusion is that linguistic competence, conceived in more traditional ways, should definitely take priority over any intercultural element. To some extent I believe this argument is valid, but in other ways I believe it misses the point as I shall now try to explain.

Depending on the context and methodology employed on a language course, students at whatever level of study should emerge with some knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, phonetic patterns, reading and listening skills, speaking and writing strategies and much more. But, of course, in order to become genuinely competent speakers, they will need in most instances to continue their learning independently or 'autonomously' in some form of relevant environment. For each aspect of linguistic competence which needs to be acquired by a student the question can, therefore, be asked what the balance may be between what can be learned through a structured language course and what needs to be acquired subsequently, or in parallel, on an autonomous basis. Consider vocabulary. A core of frequently occurring

vocabulary will hopefully have been learned during a student's formal language education – and yet this core will only be a fraction of the less frequently occurring vocabulary they will probably need if they are to go on to function effectively using the foreign language on a sustained basis. With grammar the balance is probably different. By the time students are at a fairly advanced stage of formal language study they may well have gained a fairly solid grasp of the key grammatical principles of that language. They may need to improve their accuracy, particularly in speaking, and to learn irregular forms or to pick up grammatical patterns of a less crucial kind to which they weren't introduced during formal study. Nonetheless, one might argue that whilst the autonomous phase is very important it is a form of refinement to a core of learning which has happened during formal study.

How then might this balance of what is gained during formal study and what might be acquired autonomously work out in the case of intercultural learning? Given the varied nature of the components of intercultural competence (at the very least, knowledge, skills and attitudes), it is not really possible to give a uniform answer to this question. But let us very briefly take each in turn. Is there a 'core' of cultural knowledge needed to allow a student to function effectively in a foreign language environment in any way comparable to, for instance, the core of vocabulary or grammar that can be taught during a language course? To an extent perhaps – there are key things in relation to discourse patterns and politeness codes or in relation to values or narratives with which students can be familiarized even if it requires care in the process to avoid stereotyping or essentialism. But a vast amount surely remains to be acquired autonomously. What then of skills? Students can be forewarned about culture shock and can work through skills and strategies for managing it; they can increase their awareness of how their cultural background has shaped them and how different cultural practices may well have shaped others differently and can develop skills for managing that difference; and they can begin to develop empathy for the cultural perspectives of others. Yet it is unclear how far these processes, via programs of formal study alone, can go. The same can be said, finally, of intercultural attitudes. Without doubt students can be challenged to start to move beyond stereotypical representations, to start to challenge their own ethnocentrism. But for most it is very much a long-term process to genuinely move beyond one's own cultural conditioning to become less ethnocentric. It remains, therefore, again unclear how far these processes can go within the framework of structured language programs alone and it looks as if a lot of intercultural learning will again need to take place autonomously.

Does this then mean that the objection I chose to consider is essentially correct, that intercultural competence is more 'picked up' autonomously than learned through language courses and that it can, therefore, be minimized or omitted within language courses? I believe that would be a serious mistake. Learning through structured courses and learning autonomously are, I believe, closely linked. Autonomous learning, of language or intercultural abilities, does not necessarily just occur as part of lived experience in a foreign language environment. It is a more active process which is partly structured or facilitated, in a wide variety of ways, by our learning on language courses. We are, for example, often, in part, able to continue effectively learning vocabulary autonomously because what we have already learned gives us clues as to the part of speech, or the meaning of new expressions we encounter. Similarly, we may well pick up autonomously another usage of a specific tense, not taught in the courses we have had – but that process is made far easier because we can recognize what the tense is and know its more common patterns of usage. It is hard not to think that, in different ways, the autonomous acquisition of the varied aspects of intercultural competence is similar. Where acquiring cultural knowledge is concerned, language courses can guide us towards the kinds of areas we need to observe in an unfamiliar culture – language courses can also sensitize us to the areas in which we need to self-observe in order

to come to recognize our own cultural conditioning. Intercultural skills are not so different. If one is not made aware through formal education of the kinds of skills one will need to develop to be interculturally effective, it may prove far harder to acquire them autonomously. And it is hard not to think that the development over time of the kinds of attitude needed to ensure intercultural effectiveness will not be acquired autonomously far more quickly if a student is aware of what kinds of attitude are involved having started to learn them during formal language education. Let me finish by summing up my views in this area – whilst there may be limits to how far intercultural competence can be learned through language courses it remains, in my view, an essential component of language education because those language courses prepare students for effective acquisition of intercultural competence once they are autonomous learners.

## **Conclusions**

Endless conversations with students and teachers from across the world who by studying in London are daily experiencing the lived reality of using a foreign language in an authentic environment, to say nothing of my personal experience of studying languages in formal settings, have tended to point in the same direction – that language courses which don't include an intercultural dimension leave a gap. They don't equip students for many aspects of linguistic exchange or for many other aspects of life in a foreign language environment and they don't properly equip them to acquire autonomously what they lack. And this, I believe, is why language courses must come to include intercultural elements. Now the claims I am making are purely parts of an early stage of what needs to become a more formal research process, a type of empirical research process in which the whole subject area of Intercultural Competence is not, I believe, especially strong. My claims are based on many forms of experience, many informal conversations with others who have lived in foreign language settings, and on my own analytical processes of reflection. All of this would need to be formalized if the claims I have made were to be fully substantiated, although such forms of research are eminently doable. But the 'pre-research evidence' seems to point in a fairly clear direction – unless we at least start to develop students' intercultural competence in language courses we will not be fully meeting their needs and will not be preparing them in a rounded way for the challenges they will encounter in foreign language environments or for the ways in which they will need to continue to develop.

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